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RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5578
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 7396
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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: Brazil: Local elections: Lots of Heat, Little Light

REF: A) Sao Paulo 285, B) Brasilia 674

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Campaigning for October 5 municipal elections is getting underway with much media attention and political jockeying but the results will have almost no bearing on national politics. About a fifth of the 513 federal deputies are running for mayor, and the Chamber of Deputies will get much less than usual business done from July through election day on October 5. Over 5000 towns and cities across Brazil will elect mayors and city councils but only two races are nationally significant: Sao Paulo (ref A) and Belo Horizonte. The Sao Paulo race could propel one candidate, Marta Suplicy, toward a 2010 presidential bid, and the Belo Horizonte race could strengthen the presidential chances of Aecio Neves, the governor of Minas Gerais state. End summary.

Congressional Slowdown

¶2. (SBU) So many congressmen, about a fifth of the 513 federal deputies, run for mayor every four years that the three months before local elections are called a "white recess," that is, a long, unofficial recess in which little work is done even though Congress is in session. Those who win will be replaced by their alternates, many of whom will be completely inexperienced in legislative work. The result could be an increase in congressional inefficiency, possibly worsening congress's already poor public image. In some cases the outgoing members of congress are prominent leaders. In Porto Alegre, for example, four federal deputies are running for mayor, including Onyx Lorenzoni, chairman of the agriculture committee and an influential leader of the opposition Democrats Party.

Sao Paulo

¶3. (SBU) Tourism Minister Marta Suplicy resigned on June 5 to run for mayor of Sao Paulo (ref A) and if she wins, she could decide to run for president. She would have to defeat Dilma Rousseff, chief of the Civilian Household and President Lula's current favorite, for the Workers' Party (PT) presidential nomination (ref B). The Sao Paulo race could also poison the national alliance between Social Democrats (PSDB, opposition) and Democrats (DEM, opposition). A PSDB faction led by Governor Jose Serra, a leading 2010 presidential contender, supports the reelection of the incumbent DEM mayor, who was Serra's deputy when he was mayor and has faithfully implemented Serra's policies. Another faction supports the party's own candidate, Geraldo Alckmin. The Alckmin-Serra split in the PSDB could cause significant fallout both within the party and in its alliance with the DEM, whose support is important in 2010.

Belo Horizonte

¶4. (SBU) In Belo Horizonte, capital of Minas Gerais, the second most populous state, Mayor Fernando Pimentel (PT) has tried to ally

his party with the PSDB of Governor Aecio Neves in support of a candidate from another party, but has been repeatedly blocked by the PT's national leadership. A successful PSDB-PT alliance could help both the governor and the mayor in 2010: Neves may run for president and Pimentel for governor, but the PT leadership is trying to prevent anything that would strengthen Neves because as a presidential candidate he would run against the PT. The issue is still unresolved.

Rio de Janeiro

15. (SBU) Interestingly, the local elections in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second largest city, have little national importance. Rio de Janeiro state governor Sergio Cabral (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, PMDB, government coalition) has consolidated his power base in the state and marginalized current city mayor Cesar Maia (DEM). Cabral was seen to be building a coalition to support his expected bid for the presidency in either 2010 or 2014, but he recently backtracked on his support for the local PT candidate (after pressure from his own PMDB and threats of a split within the party) and is now pressing the PMDB to support his former secretary for sports and tourism as the party's candidate. Of interest to the USG is that Federal Deputy Fernando Gabeira (Green Party), currently polling third in the mayoral race, participated in the 1969 kidnapping of U.S. Ambassador Charles Elbrick. (Note: Gabeira has publicly reversed his position and now condemns kidnapping. End note.)

Marriages of Convenience

16. (SBU) Local alliances different from the national

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government-opposition fault line are normal and, according to Andre Miranda of the PATRI consulting firm, they have nothing to do with future national alliances. They are formed for political convenience, and demonstrate the insignificance of ideology in local alliances. Often a party or candidate may seek support from another party because of the vote-getting power of a locally powerful politician who can get out the vote. There is always a quid pro quo, sometimes overt, sometimes hidden.

Comment

17. (SBU) Municipal elections generate a lot of heat but little light: they are not a good predictor of outcomes of the next national elections, and they do not bring voter concerns or grand themes into relief the way national elections do. The elections may indicate whether Marta Suplicy has a chance to run for president in 2010, whether Aecio Neves can increase his national appeal and presidential chances by allying locally with adversaries, and whether Jose Serra will find himself weakened as a result of the rebuff from within his own party, which could affect his current 2010 front-runner status. Local elections also provide an opportunity for young talent to emerge, and Mission will report significant developments. But despite the cacophony of thousands of electoral campaigns, they tell us little else.

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